

English Explained

A Guide to Misunderstood and
Confusing Elements of Grammar

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CONTENTS

Annotated contents	viii
Key to symbols	xi
Introduction	xii
Chapter format	xiv

A. NOUN, NUMBER, AND DETERMINER

1. Curious capitalisation	3
2. Nouns with changing countability	5
3. Quantities that do not add up	8
4. Collective divisions?	11
5. The singular elements of a compound	13
6. Possessing a choice	16
7. Determining an order	19
8. The strong and the weak determiner	21
9. Approximate coordination	23
10. <i>We</i> , meaning <i>me</i> or <i>you</i> or <i>us</i>	26
11. The individual pronoun problem	28
12. A specifically indefinite reference	31
13. This rule requires a second mention	35
14. Are some proper nouns more definite than others?	37
15. Can't we just omit articles?	39
Understanding 1–15	43

B. VERBS (TENSE, MOOD, AND MODALS)

16. Conversion: When words switch classes	49
17. The missing object of the transitive	52
18. The verb with various forms	55

19. Doubling up on regular verb forms	58
20. A present reading of a past action	60
21. Presenting the future in the past	63
22. The peculiar perfect progressive	65
23. Reporting on backshifting	68
24. Conditions for conditionals	70
25. In an unreal mood	73
26. Passives should be actively used	75
27. It doesn't seem active, but it doesn't look passive	78
28. '-ing' terpreting	81
29. Masquerading as modals	84
30. The possibilities of <i>may</i>	87
31. Shall I or will I?	89
32. Does <i>do</i> double up?	91
Understanding 16–32	93

C. PREPOSITIONS, ADJECTIVES, AND ADVERBS

33. Ending the preposition debate	99
34. Attributing a position to an adjective	103
35. Getting adjectives in order	106
36. Quite ungradable adjectives	108
37. Adverbs disguised as adjectives	111
38. Time adverbs that appear everywhere	114
39. When an adverb has a negative influence	116
40. To boldly split the infinitive	119
Understanding 33–40	123

D. SUBJECT, CLAUSES, AND QUESTIONS

41. The topic is the subject	127
42. Although they look like main clauses . . .	129
43. When discussing dangling . . .	131
44. Subject and verb switching	134
45. A positive clause, a positive tag	136
46. You know how to respond to this question, do you?	138
47. Unanswered questions	141
48. A word with no meaning	144

49. The sentence that makes you wait	147
50. Expanding on the contraction	149
Understanding 41–50	151
Answers	155
Appendix	157
Glossary	159
Subject index	161

ANNOTATED CONTENTS

CHAPTER TITLE	EXAMPLE	KEY QUESTION
1. Curious capitalisation	<i>Truth</i>	Why do common nouns sometimes have initial capital letters?
2. Nouns with changing countability	<i>injustices</i>	How can an uncountable noun have a plural form?
3. Quantities that do not add up	<i>Six thousand</i>	Why is the noun not plural when the modifier is a multiple?
4. Collective divisions?	<i>The agency is/are</i>	How can collective nouns take either verb form?
5. The singular elements of a compound	<i>Earnings review</i>	Is the first part of a compound able to be plural?
6. Possessing a choice	<i>The opinion of Judy Chen</i>	Shouldn't a human reference take a possessive apostrophe?
7. Determining an order	<i>Too small a range</i>	How can an article come after a modifier?
8. The strong and the weak determiner	<i>Some teacher</i>	How can <i>some</i> be used with a singular noun?
9. Approximate coordination	<i>Ten or twenty</i>	How do we know when a range of numbers is an approximation?
10. <i>We</i> , meaning <i>me</i> or <i>you</i> or <i>us</i>	<i>We accept this</i>	Why would an individual refer to themselves as <i>we</i> ?
11. The individual pronoun problem	<i>They would be responsible</i>	How can a plural pronoun relate to an individual?
12. A specifically indefinite reference	<i>We need the right candidate</i>	How can a definite article be used for an unknown individual?
13. This rule requires a second mention	<i>This is a problem that ...</i>	How can second mentions take indefinite articles?
14. Are some proper nouns more definite than others?	<i>A Mr Andrews called</i>	How can an article precede a person's name?
15. Can't we just omit articles?	<i>Subjects were observed</i>	How can a zero article be used for a definite reference?
16. Conversion: When words switch classes	<i>The build has gone well</i>	How can a verb be used as a noun?
17. The missing object of the transitive	<i>I agreed to edit.</i>	Do transitive verbs have to take an object?

CHAPTER TITLE	EXAMPLE	KEY QUESTION
18. The verb with various forms	<i>I am / He is / We are</i>	Do some verb forms look entirely different from the base form?
19. Doubling up on regular verb forms	<i>This has been labelled</i>	Are the spelling rules for regular verb forms reliable?
20. A present reading of a past action	<i>Then he walks in and . . .</i>	How can the present tense be used for a past action?
21. Presenting the future in the past	<i>The storm hits the coast soon</i>	How can the present tense be used for a future event?
22. The peculiar perfect progressive	<i>It may have been being used</i>	Can five verb forms really be employed in a row?
23. Reporting on backshifting	<i>She told me they are moving</i>	How can a past speech act be reported in the present tense?
24. Conditions for conditionals	<i>If you did, he was only there briefly</i>	Can both parts of a conditional be past tense?
25. In an unreal mood	<i>We insist that he answer</i>	Are there times when the verb does not need to be inflected?
26. Passives should be actively used	<i>She was pleased with that</i>	Do some passives not have active form equivalents?
27. It doesn't seem active, but it doesn't look passive	<i>The boxes need moving.</i>	Shouldn't a passive contain the verb <i>to be</i> ?
28. '-ing' terpreting	<i>I tried fixing / tried to fix it</i>	Is there a choice of verb form following a linking verb?
29. Masquerading as modals	<i>I daren't imagine</i>	Can other verbs act as modals?
30. The possibilities of <i>may</i>	<i>The director may be found in his office</i>	Can <i>may</i> really express certainty?
31. Shall I or will I?	<i>The employee shall carry this out</i>	What dictates the selection of <i>shall</i> over <i>will</i> ?
32. Does <i>do</i> double up?	<i>Do do this if you can</i>	Can you really have successive uses of a verb?
33. Ending the preposition debate	<i>It is not really heard of</i>	Can a sentence end with a preposition?
34. Attributing a position to an adjective	<i>injured people / people injured</i>	Can an adjective come directly after a noun?
35. Getting adjectives in order	<i>American vintage / vintage American</i>	Is the order of modifiers flexible?
36. Quite ungradable adjectives	<i>Pretty impossible</i>	Can non-gradable adjectives be modified?
37. Adverbs disguised as adjectives	<i>A strangely quiet atmosphere</i>	Can adverbs modify more than just verbs?
38. Time adverbs that appear everywhere	<i>I later stopped</i>	Where should time adverbs be placed in a sentence?
39. When an adverb has a negative influence	<i>I know not what I do</i>	Can you use <i>not</i> without a modal?
40. To boldly split the infinitive	<i>To always ask the teacher</i>	Is it ever acceptable to split an infinitive?
41. The topic is the subject	<i>Quietly is how it should be done</i>	Doesn't the subject of a sentence have to be a noun?

CHAPTER TITLE	EXAMPLE	KEY QUESTION
42. Although they look like main clauses . . .	<i>Not to panic</i>	Shouldn't every main clause have a tensed verb?
43. When discussing dangling . . .	<i>When arriving, speak to an advisor</i>	Shouldn't dangling participles be avoided?
44. Subject and verb switching	<i>Not only did they change it, but . . .</i>	Can the verb appear before the subject in statements?
45. A positive clause, a positive tag	<i>You can go, can you?</i>	Shouldn't a negative tag follow a positive main clause?
46. You know how to respond to this question, do you?	<i>Aren't you going?</i>	How do you reply positively to a negatively phrased question?
47. Unanswered questions	<i>How would they even know?</i>	Do some questions not require a response?
48. A word with no meaning	<i>It is her party next week</i>	Can some words really refer to nothing?
49. The sentence that makes you wait	<i>It is the tutors who . . .</i>	How can a singular pronoun and verb refer to a plural noun?
50. Expanding on the contraction	<i>Won't this change?</i>	What does the contraction <i>won't</i> stand for in questions?

KEY TO SYMBOLS

- * Ungrammatical: An example that contains a grammar error.
e.g. **I have begin.*
- † Speech: An example that is likely to be spoken.
e.g. *Did you see it? †*

INTRODUCTION

English is a frustrating language that rarely sticks to its own rules. To make matters worse, some of the ‘rules’ we are taught are not genuine rules at all. Add to the mix a host of idiomatic phrases and the natural idiosyncrasies that arise from hundreds of years of evolution (or stagnation) and it is no real surprise we are often left bewildered and confused by English and its grammar.

A cursory glance at a random set of English phrases and sentences will, likely, reveal that the guidelines upon which most learners of English depend, and most language school grammar sessions are based, really cannot be trusted. And even the tried and tested rules have exceptions; in fact, sometimes there are exceptions to the exceptions! The purpose of *English Explained* is to present these areas of English most affected by misinformation and confusion.

This book has been written in the first instance for teachers or prospective teachers of English whose first language is not English. But it will also appeal to any student who seeks a better grasp and understanding of English grammar—essential for achieving competency in both writing and reading.

The problem with many reference books is that they give rather narrow overviews of each grammar area and address only the standard practices. This leads learners to assume anything outside of this is incorrect usage. To address the problem, the fifty sections of *English Explained* cover the misunderstood, the misleading, and anything that a learner’s ear or eye would consider atypical. This means that, while some exceptions to a grammar rule or to the familiar usage are covered, there are also many examples that are simply irregular forms or variations to the common usage (but crucially, examples that speakers of English whose first language is not English may well consider to be erroneous).

English Explained has been designed to assist both students and teachers, especially on a practical level. Students relying on apps and software to check grammar still need a good grasp of the language to assess whether the suggestions should be followed or the warnings heeded. And teachers instructing students of various abilities will need to fill the gaps in their grammar knowledge to avoid being asked questions for which they can provide no answer. As the ultimate recipients of the information in this book will be students and teachers who are learning their craft, some of the more indulgent or exclusive vernacular

common in linguistic texts has been overlooked where possible for more practical and instructive terms.

One key aim of *English Explained* is to equip teachers with the knowledge and the awareness to answer any challenging questions that enquiring minds might pose over the course of an English class. For instance, it will not take long for a bright student to come up with examples that disprove the following:

A sentence cannot end with a preposition.

They is a plural-only pronoun.

Determiners always come before other modifiers.

Nouns must take definite articles when mentioned a second time.

Infinitives should not be split.

Although it is undoubtedly beneficial to language learners, the impact of the increasing standardisation of English does lead to a loss of understanding of word origins. This standardisation has the knock-on effect of making the elements that have not undergone a change appear even more curious and illogical to those whose first language is not English.

It is these curious and illogical elements, then, that are explored over the next 170 pages. And whether you are a teacher of the language or a student, after acquiring the necessary knowledge from the pages of *English Explained* you'll be able to confidently answer any grammar query—no matter how seemingly complex or obscure—raised in your classroom.

Steve Hart
2019

CHAPTER FORMAT

Chapter title

Curious capitalisation

Introduction—general grammar points

An initial capital letter indicates that a word is a proper noun . . .

Example(s)—contrary and confusing examples

(5) We are all seekers of the Truth.

Student enquiry—questions a learner may have about the examples

I know that capital letters should be used when words are proper nouns, but . . .

Explanation—answers to those questions and further exploration of the point(s)

An initial capital indicates that a noun is naming something . . .

And another thing . . .—other related points of interest

Prefixes that are attached to proper nouns are not capitalised.

1

Curious capitalisation

An initial capital letter indicates that a word is a proper noun (unless the word begins a sentence, in which case it must have a capital but may not be a proper noun). A proper noun identifies the name of a person, place or organisation.

Emily Leung Thailand Maitland Industries

Words derived from proper nouns, such as their adjective forms, will also require initial capitals.

Marxist Swedish Dickensian

Geographical features and political divisions of land are familiar to most as terms that will require initial capital letters (*Gobi Desert, Atlantic Ocean, North Dakota*). Perhaps less evident is that some historical events and institutions will also need them.

the Great Plague the Second World War the House of Lords

—To demonstrate the distinction between a proper and a common noun, example (1) provides two instances of the noun *university*. The first instance represents part of the name of a specific institution (meaning it is a proper noun and therefore is capitalised). The second instance is also referring to a specific university but is not stating the name of the institution (meaning it is a common noun and therefore should be lower case).

The University of Hong Kong is now part of this scheme. Another university has also shown some interest. (1)

—Initial capitals can be used on words appearing in titles and headings. It is customary to keep any prepositions, co-ordinators or articles lower case.

Implementing a New Primary Chinese Curriculum: Impact on Learning Outcomes within a Small Rural School. (2)

Internet Regulation in Japan after the 2000s. (3)

Table 3: Education Deprivation by Age and Disability. (4)



(5) We are all seekers of the Truth.

(6) The depiction of Death with a scythe grew from this tradition.

Student enquiry: I know that capital letters should be used when words are proper nouns, but I sometimes see nouns other than names and places given initial capitals. For example, what is the reason for common nouns like *truth* and *death* being given capitals, as in (5) and (6)?

Explanation

An initial capital indicates that a noun is naming something and is therefore a unique reference. But situations do arise when common nouns are given proper-noun status. Concepts such as *truth*, *beauty*, *time*, *death* and *fate* can take initial capitals in certain circumstances, usually when the absolute or principal version of the idea is meant by the writer. There is often an element of personification (when human qualities are given to non-human subjects) and symbolism to this usage, as is apparent in (6).

Care should be taken with this practice of capitalisation because it is more a literary device suited to fiction and poetry, and the nouns able to take a capital in this way are few.

And another thing . . . 1

Prefixes that are attached to proper nouns are not capitalised.

Most of these buildings are pre-Victorian.

Their later work reflected this anti-Hollywood stance.

When the prefix derives from a proper noun, though, initial capitals should be used for both parts.

It is a Sino-Vietnamese word meaning 'comfort'.

This was a key period for Anglo-Irish relations.

2

Nouns with changing countability

A countable noun can, unsurprisingly, appear after the determiners *a*, *three*, and *many*. And because the noun *doctor* is countable, we can write *a doctor*, *three doctors* and *many doctors*. Likewise, the noun *evidence* is uncountable, cannot be made plural, and for this reason **an evidence*, **three evidences* and **many evidences* are incorrect forms.

Associated with countability is the concept of boundedness. The idea is that a countable noun is countable because it has a clear boundary that will mark it out as an entity with a clear beginning and an end (although not necessarily in a physical or tangible sense). Uncountable nouns are unbounded and viewed as a unit or mass with no potential for division; they cannot be separated like countable nouns. Despite the distinction, it is not always easy to categorise nouns as definitively one or the other. There are four areas of interest here:

~1: some typically countable nouns can receive mass (uncountable) interpretations.

A ballet is a countable activity. But when reference is made to the dance form in general terms, it takes on an uncountable meaning (1i).

In a distinguished career he wrote seventeen ballets for the company. (1i)

His daughter also studied ballet. (1ii)

In this next example, the uncountable instance of *paper* (2i) is referring to the material. The countable instance is the functional product, i.e. written documents that traditionally consisted of sheets of the material (2ii) (which can now be electronic in origin).

It needs to be written on paper. (2i)

She has published several papers recently. (2ii)

In (3i), the uncountable noun refers to space in general; in (3ii), the plural indicates specific areas or spaces.

We don't have room for them currently. (3i)

The second floor has three meeting rooms. (3ii)

We can see, then, a relationship between the general idea, element or material (the uncountable instance) and a specific case or example of it (the countable instance).

~2: some nouns widely regarded as uncountable can be used in a countable way with an indefinite article (4i) but lack a plural form (4ii).

In (4i), an uncountable noun takes an indefinite article for an instance of the concept or a type.

A greater appreciation for nature is the outcome of all of this. (4i)

**They need to show some appreciations.* (4ii)

This practice is more common than one might think. Here, *knowledge* is the uncountable noun used with the indefinite article.

It was a knowledge that would prove vital in her new career. (5)

~3: some uncountable nouns appear to have countable equivalents but they are, in fact, unrelated.

Here are two instances of the noun *depression*. But they are unconnected words and have independent meanings.

There is no suggestion that depression is a factor. (6i)

The course was disrupted by two large depressions in the road. (6ii)

~4: some nouns are found only in the plural.

The nouns underlined in (7) and (8) have no singular form.

The proceeds went to a local charity. (7)

Some of the clothes on display were from an earlier collection. (8)

—There is a lack of clarity about certain nouns. Some consider *data* to be singular, while others use it as a plural (the latter group acknowledging a singular form, *datum*). *News* and *politics* appear plural in form but in (9) and (10) take a singular demonstrative (*this*) and a singular verb (*is*) respectively, which is true of many fields of study and sports (e.g. *economics*, *mathematics*, *athletics*).

*I received this news on Friday. (*I received these news on Friday.)* (9)

*Politics is unlikely to be a reason for this. (*Politics are . . .)* (10)



(11) Certain behaviours are considered 'programmed'.

(12) Several of these injustices were highlighted in the report.

(13) He evidences this in the second section of the document.

Student enquiry: The nouns in (11), (12) and (13) are all uncountable (*behaviour, (in)justice and evidence*) and yet they have plural forms in these examples. I didn't know that an uncountable noun could be split up, as it is considered a mass. This usage is even more surprising given that the examples seem to be abstract nouns. If they are concepts, how can they be plural?

Explanation

Examples (11) and (12) do contain concept nouns, but sometimes these nouns can be used to refer to specific instances of the idea or the notion (in our examples, *behaviours* that somebody has shown and *injustices* that have come to light). Concept nouns with this bounded or divisible interpretation are prolific in the human sciences and in the terminology of legal studies. In (11), then, the typically uncountable noun *behaviour* has a countable reading and takes a plural. Here are some further examples.

They often display behaviours that we would consider atypical. (14)

The next step is to work out the incomes of these employees. (15)

Different energies act upon the body in different ways. (16)

Some uncountable nouns cannot be made plural, but this capability for division may still apply. They must rely on a partitive phrase such as *piece of* or *type of* or expressions like *a period of* to represent these instances of the noun. It is therefore inaccurate to explicitly say that mass or uncountable nouns cannot be divided up. *Information* is one such uncountable noun that has no plural capacity. It relies on a partitive phrase.

There are certain types of information that should remain classified. (17)

**There are certain informations . . .*

(13) is actually a verb in the third person singular and does not relate to this discussion. It is a common mistake to make. *Evidence* can be both a noun (*a piece of evidence*) and a verb (*I am able to evidence this*).

And another thing . . . 2

We saw uncountable nouns taking indefinite articles earlier. Well, even some plural nouns can receive them.

They suggested that we store the historical records in an archives.

Understanding 1–15

Note: some questions may have more than one correct answer. Some questions may have no correct or no incorrect answers.

1. A. Which one of these nouns might take a capital letter despite not being a proper noun?
distance change beauty
- B. Which of the following should have an initial capital letter?
shakespearian infrastructure lawyer indian government
2. A. Which of these uncountable nouns can be subdivided or split up without the need for a partitive phrase?
advice information ability
- B. Which of the following descriptions applies to uncountable nouns?
unbounded cannot be used with a definite article
cannot be used with *much* cannot take on a partitive phrase
3. A. Which of the following terms can be collectivised?
partridge monkey sugar
- B. Which of these can take a plural verb (e.g. are, were)?
10,000 pounds 10,000 hours
10,000 people 10,000 kilometres
4. A. Which of the following is NOT a collective noun?
committee board people
- B. Which of these sentences could take a plural verb?
The board is meeting today. The board is split on this issue.
The board is dominated by male members.

5. A. The first word of which of these compounds can be made plural?
child support system analyst insect spray
- B. Which of these statements is true?
When two words in a compound have equal weight, they will be hyphenated.
Only irregular plurals can act as the modifier in a compound.
In compound adjectives the stress will fall on the second part.
6. A. Which of these genitive forms is correctly written?
childrens' activities June's month the bus's engine
- B. Which of these statements about *of*-phrases is false?
They are usually associated with new information.
They are usually informal in tone.
They often contain impersonal references.
7. A. Which of these phrases shows the correct order of words?
too small a target too small target a too small target
- B. Which of the following cannot appear before a definite article?
more much most
8. A. Which of these uses of *some* is for emphasis?
Some lesson was on. There was some lesson in there.
That was some lesson.
- B. What type of noun cannot be used with the determiner *any*?
singular plural uncountable All three types can be used.
9. A. Which of these phrases will require a plural verb form?
The petition and later demonstration The hallway and lounge
The captain and leader
- B. Which of these is least likely to be an approximation?
5 or 6 7 or 9 20 or 30 50 or 55
10. A. Which of these instances of *we* has a generic connotation?
We left a lot before that. We are conditioned to that.
We are nervous, though.

- B. Which of the following instances of *we* is equivalent in meaning to 'you'?
- We do have confidence today. We can do that, can we?
- We will meet them in a coffee shop.
- 11. A.** In which construction could *they* refer to an individual?
- They drive to work. They meet on Tuesdays. They work together.
- B. Which of these pronouns should be used to fill in the gap?
- In the men's tournament a golfer used ____ putter to escape the hazard.*
- its his her their
- 12. A.** What articles are appropriate for a specific reference?
- zero and indefinite articles definite article all three
- B. Which of these sentences is clearly referring to a specific company?
- The company should do that for them.
- A company changes its mind at stage three.
- A large company chooses this option rather than withdrawing.
- 13. A.** What is the correct order for articles in a paragraph?
- There is no set order. zero, indefinite then definite
- indefinite then definite
- B. What reasons might allow a writer to use a definite article for the first mention of a noun?
- the immediate situation or surroundings
- a logical relationship with something else
- a wish to create urgency
- 14. A.** In which instance might you NOT use an article before a person's name?
- when discussing a stranger
- when the listener knows the individual
- for clarifying someone's identity
- B. There are two Mr Andrews in a company, and they work in different departments. Both of them are well known in the company. Which of the following forms would NOT be likely for one colleague to say to another?
- Mr Andrews from accounts called. A Mr Andrews from accounts called.
- The Mr Andrews from accounts called.

15. A. In which situation(s) might a writer remove all the articles?

In a headline In a title In a scientific description

B. Which of these contains incorrect article use?

The president is unavailable. He was president for ten years.

President visited last year. The country changed president recently.

16

Conversion: When words switch classes

English is a fluid language that is constantly evolving. New words are created and old ones manipulated all the time. One method of creating words is through conversion. Conversion occurs when an existing word is adopted by or utilised in a different word class.

When a verb has originated from a noun, the verb often relates to an action that is based on a typical characteristic of the noun.

noun—*hare* (animal) verb—to *hare* (*about*)

noun—*water* (substance) verb—to *water* (*the plants*)

An interesting conversion is the noun *pocket*, which in its converted verb form concerns the action of putting something into a pocket.

He pocketed the change quickly. (1)

Another noun that has experienced conversion is *ship*. In truth, when something is shipped it does not necessarily mean transported by ship.

They will be shipped tomorrow to the address provided along with the other products. (2)

And a recent example of converting a noun into a verb is *to Google*, from the act of using the search engine of the same name.

I use Google when I want to find out about something. (noun) (3i)

Did you Google it? † (verb) (3ii)

—Correspondingly, when a noun is formed from a verb using this process, it will often relate to the outcome of the action.

verb—to drive noun—a drive

So, the action of driving results in *a drive* in a car.



(4) The build has gone well so far.

(5) We could contract these further to make it easier.

(6) The wise have no time for these matters.

Student enquiry: Is it OK to use the verb *to build* like a noun, as occurs in (4)? And in (5), this use of *contract* as a verb does not seem to relate at all to the noun *contract*, which is an agreement between two people. Also, would (6) be regarded as an instance of conversion because *wise* is usually an adjective but seems to be a noun here?

Explanation

The outcome of building a house is the house itself: the noun is a derivation of the verb *to build*. So, (4) is an example of conversion. The two terms have related meanings and are said to be polysemes (see **Glossary**). Here is a further example.

There are a lot of new builds in this area. (7)

It also seems as though conversion may have taken place in (5); however, the noun *contract* and the verb *contract* have unrelated meanings. (5) is not an example of conversion; these are just two independent words with the same spelling. And instead of being polysemes they are referred to as homonyms (see **Glossary**).

contract (noun)—an agreement between two or more parties

contract (verb)—to reduce in size; to shrink

Semantic shifts can lead to two words that were at one time polysemes reduced to simply homonyms. This means words that were historically connected are now no longer related in meaning; yet some homonyms may have never had a natural link to each other.

When spoken, identical verb and noun forms can be distinguished. The stress on the noun will fall on a different part of the word from the verb.

noun—próduce verb—to producé

In the verb form above there is a slight pause between the *pro-* and the *-duce*, which is not necessary when pronouncing the noun form.

Here are some more examples. Note where the accent falls.

noun cómpound cóntract éxtract récord

verb compóund contráct extráct recórd

—Some adjectives can be converted to, or at least take on the appearance of, nouns. With the addition of a definite article they are equivalent to ‘those who are (adjective)’. We have an example of this in (6). But the conversion is not absolute because these terms are still modified by adverbs (8) and cannot take a possessive case (9).

I would categorise them as the very wise. (8)

**The wise’s way is to question everything.* (9)

Sometimes they refer to a specific group rather than a general type.

The guilty were taken out of the courthouse. (10)

And another thing . . . 16

Reference books can be a source of confusion where polysemes (see **Glossary**) and homonyms are concerned. Some dictionaries focus simply on the spelling of the word and thus contain a single entry with multiple items regardless of the semantic relationship. Here is a dictionary entry for the term *contract*.

Contract—(*noun*) a written or spoken agreement enforceable by law
 (*verb*) decrease in size, number or range

There is an argument for two separate entries here because the instances are distinct (unrelated). And this format would perhaps be more helpful to the learner of English.

Contract—(*noun*) a written or spoken agreement enforceable by law
 Contract—(*verb*) decrease in size, number or range

Compare this now with the term *produce*. The two definitions are related, so a single dictionary entry is appropriate.

Produce—(*verb*) make or manufacture from components or raw materials
 (*noun*) agricultural and other natural products collectively

It would surely make sense for homonyms to occur as multiple entries and polysemes to come under a single entry. That said, it can be difficult to tell whether two words are true homonyms. Words derived from foreign terms or that have experienced a shift or corruption in meaning could provide a test to those researching their origins and trying to implement this advice.

17

The missing object of the transitive

A verb can be classified in several ways. One category is the distinction between transitive and intransitive and this relates to sentence structure. Transitive verbs are said to express an action. They are also said to require an object, which will be a noun phrase.

They love this scheme. † (1)

Verbs that are used intransitively do not take objects.

Yes, we talk. † (2)

Many verbs, though, can be employed both transitively (3i, 4i) and intransitively (3ii, 4ii). Note that there is often a difference in meaning between the two forms.

Michael changed companies again. † (3i)

I was not the only one to think Michael changed. (3ii)

We have left this second issue for later. (4i)

No, she has also left. † (4ii)

The transitive instance in (3i) reports Michael moving to another company. The intransitive form refers to a difference in Michael's character. The transitive in (4i) tells us something has been put on hold or set aside for later. The intransitive (4ii) refers to an absence or departure.



(5) I will respond with an email. †

(6) I was thankful that Ken agreed to edit.

Student enquiry: I looked up the verbs *respond* and *edit* in the dictionary and it said they were intransitive and transitive respectively. Why, then, does *respond* have an object in (5) when it shouldn't have one and *edit* has no object attached to it in (6) when it requires one?

Explanation

The intransitive verb *respond* does not have an object in (5); it is just a prepositional phrase that is adding extra information. The presence of an infinitive phrase may also give this impression, i.e. that an intransitive is taking an object.

They arrived to see that the event had already begun. (7)

Edit in (6) is indeed a transitive verb, but the writer has used ellipsis (see **Glossary**) and omitted the object (*it/the document*). Leaving the object out is especially common when its identity is clear from the context.

Jane writes as well.† (8)

It is also a well-established practice for a transitive verb to be used intransitively for a habitual or general action (as opposed to a specific occurrence of that action).

Yes, we give at Thanksgiving too.† *It's not often that I refuse.* (9, 10)

In fact, there are very few verbs that must, in all instances, occur with a clear direct object present. The writer in (11) has used transitive verbs without needing to include objects for them.

He often takes but rarely gives during these sessions. (11)

And in conditional *if*-sentences a transitive verb may not require an object either.

If you like, we can change it.† (12)

Here we have a passive construction with a transitive verb lacking a direct object.

The issue has been discussed. (13)

Looking at this in reverse, we can see that it is not possible for intransitive verbs (here, *arrive* and *go*) to take direct objects.

**We arrive the airport in the evening.* **I will go the office soon.*

And another thing . . . 17

Most verbs, then, cannot be pinned down to one category or one meaning. And the common definition that verbs are 'doing' words that denote an action and are modified by adverbs is not always accurate either. In this next example, the first instance of the verb relates to an action but the second to a state. It follows that the meaning of the verb will be different for each instance.

I see the manager in half an hour.†

I see you've changed the format again.†

Linking or copular verbs will also relate to a state and not an action. And they take subject complements, not objects.

She seemed confused by the change of venue.

So, not all instances of verbs denote action. But even ones that do might not be modified by adverbs. Here, an action verb appears alongside a complement headed by an adjective.

I arrived worried and unable to concentrate (see also 34).

33

Ending the preposition debate

The selection of a preposition may be governed by the term preceding it when the preposition's role is functional. For instance, *similar*, *likelihood* and *accompanied* happen to take specific prepositions.

This is similar to the scheme in 1999. (1)

The likelihood of this happening is remote. (2)

They were accompanied by their respective teachers. (3)

When the preposition is used lexically or factually, the meaning (which will relate to one-, two-, or three-dimensional space) determines the choice.

We waited behind the main building for them to arrive. (4)

These islands are all below sea level. (5)

There may be a more figurative (i.e. not literal) reference to location or place.

They are moving towards a crossroads in the negotiations. (6)

We are behind our manager 100%.† (7)

I am not into these topics really. (8)

The gerund will influence the selection of the preposition in these opening clauses, the meaning equivalent to *as a result of*.

On reading the report, the director chose to reinstate the employee. (9)

In moving this, they have managed to create valuable space. (10)

—Some words have a relationship with more than one preposition, in which case context will likely determine the selection. In (11), selecting *for* or *of* will depend on whether the speaker is focusing on the well-being of the person (i) or the thoughtful action (ii).

It was good for them to organise the trip. (11i)

It was good of them to organise the trip. (11ii)

—Although prepositions are a main word class in English, there is no such class as postpositions in the language. The only candidates would be terms like *ago*, and *notwithstanding* following a noun phrase, but these are generally considered to be an adverb and an adjective respectively.

It occurred around two weeks ago. (12)

These objectives notwithstanding, the proposal will require significant amendments. (13)

Prepositions that occur at the end of a sentence are not classed as postpositions either (but they are said to be postposed). Their position (i.e. the reason for the *pre-* part of their name) relates to the complement to which they are attached and not whether they appear near the beginning or near the end of the sentence. When phrases are fronted, i.e. moved to the ‘front’ of the sentence, this can leave the preposition stranded at the end (14ii).

I can think of two instances. (14i)

There are two instances I can think of. (14ii)

Equally, prepositions can be fronted as seen in (15i). Sometimes, this produces a more eloquent style.

At which institution did he study? † (15i)

Compare: *Which institution did he study at? †* (15ii)

But it would be wrong to think that all sentences can or should be structured this way. For one thing, this fronting is not always viable.

What did he say that for? † **For what did he say that?* (16)

Other times the fronting just sounds awkward or overly affected (17ii).

What are you using that with? † (17i)

Compare: *With what are you using that? †* (17ii)

—The prepositions in so-called prepositional verbs (18ii) are sometimes labelled ‘postpositions’, but their nature is largely idiomatic (see **Glossary**) and linked only to the verbs they are in partnership with. It seems to make little sense to create a new word class or to think of them as anything other than prepositions (see **And another thing**).

You can work at the desk. † (18i)

You should look at the weather now! † (18ii)



(19) Can you see what the lever is for?†

(20) No, it is not really heard of.†

Student enquiry: I was always told that you cannot end a sentence with a preposition, but both (19) and (20) finish with them. Are there occasions when this rule does not need to be followed, then?

Explanation

An obvious talking point regarding prepositions is the so-called ‘rule’ that you cannot finish a sentence with one. This guideline was created and gained in popularity from a misguided attempt to force the grammar rules of Latin onto English and the publication of some dubious prescriptive grammar guides in the early twentieth century. It has already been shown that there are several situations where a preposition cannot be fronted and where, if a phrase is fronted, it may finish up at the end of the sentence.

Indeed, there is a reason why a famous Irish pop group chose not to adopt ‘I still haven’t found for what I am looking’ as the title of their song.

In practice, there is nothing wrong with ending a sentence with one. In fact, it is quite natural to do so in relative clauses and in questions (19). Certainly, prepositions that have a tendency to form partnerships (or collocate) with other terms (commonly *on*, *in*, *at*, *of*) will often be stranded at the end of the sentence, with no available means of fronting (20).

And another thing . . . 33

Some phrases that comprise a verb + preposition can be split up by an object.

They should also take off their jewellery.

They should also take their jewellery off.

These are often called phrasal verbs, and the prepositional word is considered an adverb in this construction. It is also commonly referred to as a particle (see **Glossary**). But some verb + preposition forms cannot be split up like this. For the purpose of comparison,

A *take off* = verb + adverb (particle) *take (something) off*

B *depend on* = verb + preposition **depend (something) on*

Arguments have been made for particles to be seen as either a subclass of adverbs or a subclass of prepositions (the latter camp would therefore recognise

both types [A and B] as containing prepositions). This latter view is certainly a simpler categorisation, because these words are already familiar as prepositions. They are also acting as a complement to the verb, which adverbs tend not to do (adverbs are usually adjuncts [see **Glossary**]). It may be easier to think of these particles as a subclass of prepositions that do not take complements and perform like adverbs than as a very limited member of the adverb class. Many adverbs can modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs and even whole sentences. But *on*, *up* and *with* have none of this versatility, as the following rather puerile syntactic test demonstrates:

Modifying adjectives: *They were exactly right.* **They were on/up/with right.*

Modifying verbs: *She steadily improved it.* **She on/up/with improved it.*

Modifying other adverbs: *It works quite poorly.* **It works on/up/with poorly.*

34

Attributing a position to an adjective

When adjectives appear directly before the noun that they are modifying or clarifying, they are said to be in an attributive position (1i) (see **Glossary**). Adjectives can also be used predicatively, that is, after a linking or copular verb (1ii). Observe the position of *finished* here.

The finished product was delivered to the company with a week to spare. (1i)

This one is finished but those are incomplete.† (1ii)

Ordinarily, a modifying word that comes after the verb would be an adverb (e.g. *He walks calmly*). But, and as seen in (1ii), copular verbs such as *be*, *appear*, *look*, *seem*, can be followed by adjectives (e.g. *He appears calm*).

—Some adjectives have restrictions on where they can be placed in a clause. The adjectives *sheer* and *sole* can only be used attributively.

The sheer magnitude of the industry is a daunting prospect for these new entrants. (2)

Contact was made with the sole tenant of the property. (3)

Others are restricted to the predicative position.

The pupils are afraid of the new tutor. (4)

**The afraid pupils*

Some present participles (5) and past participles (6) can be used attributively.

The moving vehicle was then recorded for 30 seconds. (5)

To achieve the required score, there will need to be evidence of critical engagement. (6)

—Adjectives that have a temporary or momentary sense attached to them tend not to be used attributively. That is why feelings and emotions are unlikely to premodify.

The participants are now eating in the common room.† (7)

*The eating participants . . .

But an adjective describing a more permanent or fixed state can be used in either position.

This report is extensive and covers all the key issues. (8i)

This extensive report covers all the key issues. (8ii)



(9) It did not take them long to contact the managers concerned / the concerned managers.

(10) We spoke to the injured people / the people injured.

(11) We will then hear an address from the governor general.

Student enquiry: In these examples an adjective is being used directly after a noun. I thought that an adjective had to be used either directly before the noun (*excited people*) or directly after a linking verb (*the people are excited*). Also, is there any difference in meaning between the two options in (9) and (10)?

Another instance of an adjective being used directly after a noun is in (11), where the noun *governor* is premodifying the adjective *general*.

Explanation

Adjectives can occupy a postpositive position, which means they appear directly after the noun. In (9), the position of the adjective does affect the meaning of the sentence. The *managers concerned* refers to the relevant managers or the managers that are involved. But as a premodifier, *concerned* has the meaning of worried or troubled, so *concerned managers* will be worried or troubled ones.

In (10), the adjective can be used before or after the noun with no change in meaning. Both *injured people* and *people injured* are semantically equivalent. There are instances, then, where an adjective can have a single interpretation (like with *injured* but not *concerned*); often though, when the adjective comes before the noun (13), it will relate to a condition that is more permanent in nature than if it came after.

Obviously, people sensitive should make other arrangements. (12)

Obviously, sensitive people should make other arrangements. (13)

(12) refers to people who are experiencing a temporary state of sensitivity based on the current situation or event. So, this is a warning for those that are sensitive

to the specific thing being discussed and for them to make other arrangements. (13), on the other hand, refers to people who are generally sensitive—people who have sensitivity to things as a characteristic.

(11) features a set phrase in which an adjective occurs directly after a noun. Set phrases of this nature are often loan words (from French) or archaic forms. Principally, they are positions of rank or legal terms.

lieutenant general force majeure court-martial femme fatale

Another adjective that can appear after the noun is *aplenty*. In fact, it is limited to this position.

There was talent aplenty at the previous conference. (14)

There are even occasions when the adjective follows the noun but the modifying roles are reversed. Here in (15), it is the noun that is modifying the head adjective.

It was not just loud; it was rock concert loud.† (15)

And another thing . . . 34

An interesting and sometimes creative use of the language is the phrasal compound adjective. In the second example, a comparative phrase has been moved to the front of the noun phrase.

The length was far longer than originally planned.

It was a far longer length than originally planned.

This fronting is not possible when the phrase contains a complement.

The student is best at solo projects.

**A best at solo projects student.*

Premodification of the noun can take extreme forms in informal texts and in fiction writing, with often a frenzy of hyphens applied.

It was another one of his ten-miles-but-feels-like-seventy road trips.

Understanding 33–40

Note: some questions may have more than one correct answer. Some questions may have no correct or no incorrect answers.

- 33.** A. In which of these sentences are you NOT able to 'front' the preposition?
Which school did he study at? What did he do that for?
What station was it at?
- B. Which preposition should follow the term *likelihood*?
It will depend on the context. in on of
- 34.** A. Which of these participles can be used attributively?
found afraid sole
- B. Which position is an adjective NOT able to occupy in a sentence?
directly after a noun directly after a verb directly before a noun
- 35.** A. Which of these modifiers would come first if they were all modifying the same head noun in a sentence?
large three new
- B. When would you NOT use a comma to split up adjectives?
when the adjectives are of the same type/category
when the adjectives might otherwise lead to ambiguity
when the adjectives are of different types/categories
- 36.** A. Which of the following terms is NOT a comparative phrase?
upper lower more simple
- B. Which of the following adjectives can take either an inflection or *more* for their comparative?
simple honest quiet selfish

37. A. Which of these word classes can adverbs modify?

Other adverbs adjectives verbs

B. Which of the following words can be both an adjective and an adverb?

late wrong daily old

38. A. In which position(s) can the time adverb *later* appear in a sentence?

after the main verb at the beginning at the end

B. Which of these is NOT true about the time adverb *yet*?

It cannot occur in negative sentences. It often appears after an auxiliary.

It can appear at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of a sentence.

39. A. When an adverb follows a negative term, it . . .

is not influenced by the negation. is influenced by the negation.

is representative of an older literary style.

B. Which is the most suitable phrase to indicate that there was not much interest?

Fewer people signed up. Few people signed up.

A few people signed up.

40. A. What is the phrase *to always make* considered an example of?

a split infinitive a comparative construction a dangling modifier

B. What happens when an adverb is fronted for emphasis?

The infinitive will be split. The subject and verb may be inverted.

The sentence will take on a negative meaning.

41

The topic is the subject

As a standard description, most reference books state that the subject of a sentence will be a person, place or thing in the form of a noun or noun phrase. They'll also likely assert that the subject will be what the sentence is about, i.e. its topic. We can clearly identify the subjects in (1) and (2) and recognise that information is being provided about them.

The issue has not yet been resolved. (1)

I added two more countries to my sample. (2)

But next, we have an infinitive verb form (3), a subordinate clause (4), and a direct quote (5) as subjects—going against these general guidelines.

To question the teacher is seen as disrespectful. (3)

Why he is doing this is anybody's guess.† (4)

'We don't wish to make drastic changes' was a common expression used. (5)

And in (6), *anyone* is the subject. It is questionable whether this pronoun can be considered the topic or that we are receiving information about it. The principal information is the changing of status.

Anyone can change their status. (6)

In (7) the reference is generic and the pronoun *you* performs the role of subject. But this sentence is about skating, the main square and the time of year—everything apart from the subject!

In winter, you can skate in the main square. (7)



(8) Nobody has seen this latest design.

(9) Equally vague are these obligations.

(10) Quietly is how it should be done.

(11) Move your things!†

Student enquiry: What is the subject of the sentence in (8)? I thought perhaps it was *nobody*, but could it be the noun phrase *latest design*? And in (9), again, I cannot identify a subject. For (10), I am wondering whether an adverb (*Quietly*) can function as the subject of a sentence. And I cannot identify a subject at all in (11).

Explanation

(8) is a good example of a sentence having no real contender for actor, but *nobody* is indeed the subject. The topic would be regarded as *the latest design* and the fact that no one has seen it.

The subject in (9) is *these obligations* and it has been placed at the end to allow the complement *equally vague* to be fronted. Note also the subject-verb inversion and the fact that the verb is plural to agree with the subject.

There could be debate over the identity of the subject in (10). Some might argue that the adverb *quietly* is the subject of the sentence (a function that an adverb would never normally hold), while others would recognise *it* as the true subject, whatever *it* might be. But bear in mind that this would not be classed as a dummy subject (see **And another thing** below); we are just unaware what the pronoun is referring to, having only been given a short extract to work from.

(11) is an imperative, and in these types of sentence the subject can be implied.

And another thing . . . 41

A sentence may also contain what is known as a 'dummy' subject (see 48 and 49).

It is clear that problems exist.

In this instance, *it* fills in as the subject, but there is no real meaning attached to it. This serves as another example of a subject not providing the topic or any real information to the reader (*there* is also commonly used as a dummy; see 48).

50

Expanding on the contraction

As well as indicating possession, apostrophes can be employed to substitute for the missing words in a contraction.

He's the oldest member of the team. (1)

Here, the apostrophe represents the missing letter *i* of the phrase *He is*. In (2), it stands in for *ha* in the phrase *She had*.

She'd better not go without me.† (2)

She'd can also signify *she would*.

She'd do that as well, wouldn't she? † (3)

There are a few other contractions that can represent more than one modal/auxiliary.

he'll—he will / he shall I'd—I had / I would It's—It is / It has

—The characteristic mistake in this area is confusing the determiner *its* with the contraction of *it is*.

**We will try to find it's simplest form.* (4i)

We will try to find its simplest form. (4ii)

—Informally, contractions can be used on nouns to substitute for *is* or *has*.

The textbook's telling us to switch the operators around.† (5)



(6) I won't change the setting.†

(7) Won't this change the setting?†

Student enquiry: I know that *won't* stands for *will not* and in (6), the contracted form can be replaced by *will not*. But in (7) I realise that you cannot say *will not this*, so what does *won't* represent here?

Explanation

(6) is a statement in which *won't* is equivalent to *will not*. However, in interrogatives (questions) *won't* is not considered a substitute for *will not*. In (7), which is an interrogative, *Won't this* is equivalent instead to *Will this not*.

Compare this with (8).

This won't change the setting, will it? (This will not change . . .) (8)

Because *won't* is in the main clause and it is a statement, there is equivalence between *won't* and *will not*. The interrogative is only in the tag part and so has no bearing on things.

Another feature of *won't* is that, along with other negative contractions, it is able to end a sentence (9). Most affirmative contractions cannot be used in the final position (where ellipsis will be taking place).

I will remember, but he won't.† (9)

We haven't got our questionnaires yet, but they have.† (10)

**We haven't got our questionnaires yet, but they've.*

They wouldn't ask questions, but we would.† (11)

**They wouldn't ask questions, but we'd.*

And another thing . . . 50

When *let us* has the meaning of *allow us* or *permit us*, it cannot be contracted.

Let us use this tomorrow and we can return the favour on Friday.†

Let us find out for ourselves.†

Only the inclusive (me and you) imperative form of *let us* can be contracted. The second example means *allow us to find out for ourselves* (i.e. *do not tell us*). If we change this to an instruction or a suggestion, then the contraction can be employed.

Let's find out for ourselves, shall we? †

Understanding 41–50

Note: some questions may have more than one correct answer. Some questions may have no correct or no incorrect answers.

- 41.** A. What is the subject in the sentence *Equally vague are their values*?
equally vague their values their
- B. In what instance might a subject NOT appear in a sentence?
when it is an imperative when the sentence is passive
when the sentence contains an indefinite pronoun
- 42.** A. What do the phrases *good to know*, *not to panic*, *president to marry* have in common?
They are all interrogatives. They do not contain a finite verb.
They do not contain a subject.
- B. What do headline writers sometimes do?
omit the subject omit a direct object omit a tensed verb form
- 43.** A. The sentence *Being late, the class had already begun* contains what?
a superlative a dangling participle a split infinitive
- B. Which of these comments about absolute phrases is true?
They don't have to contain a verb. They always contain instructions.
They always appear at the beginning of a sentence.
- 44.** A. When might you see the subject and verb switching places?
in a sentence that ends in *not* in a conditional clause
in an embedded question

- B. Complete the sentence: *Not only did I go . . .*
 but also I spoke about my experiences.
 I also spoke about my experiences.
 but I also spoke about my experiences.
- 45.** A. A positive statement followed by a positive tag could sound what?
 professional sarcastic supportive
- B. *You are going, aren't you?* When asking this question, to indicate that you consider them to be going you should NOT use:
 neutral intonation rising intonation falling intonation
- 46.** A. Which of the following is NOT a characteristic of a declarative question?
 It asks a question. It requires rising intonation.
 It requires an exclamation mark.
- B. Which of the following would be an ambiguous response to the question *Didn't you like it?*
 Yes, I did. No, I did. Yes No
- 47.** A. What type of question does the sentence *Would you be able to tell me where the library is?* contain?
 exclamatory rhetorical embedded
- B. Which of these positively framed questions has a negative connotation?
 Could you see that from there? Could you move that over here?
 Could it be any clearer?
- 48.** A. In which of these sentences is *there* being used as a dummy subject?
 There they are, by the office. There was an issue earlier It is there.
- B. Which of the following can serve as a dummy subject?
 there it here their do
- 49.** A. Which of these is considered a pseudo-cleft sentence?
 It is the first system that we like. What we want is a voice.
 The winner is Sophie.
- B. Clefts can be linked by clauses that begin with which of these words?
 who then that since

50. A. In which sentence is *won't* NOT equivalent to *will not*?

Won't they stay? I won't start just yet. They won't need to.

B. Contractions may be used on nouns as a substitute for which of these words?

will his has is

SUBJECT INDEX

clause 24–27 = Information on clauses can be found in chapters 24, 25, 26, and 27.

adjective 1, 5, 14, 16, 27, 28, 33–37

comparatives 34–37, 42

compound 5

derived from proper noun 1

adverb 33, 34, 36–41, 44

articles 1, 2, 7, 12–16, 39

capitalisation of 1

indefinite 2, 7, 12–15, 39

aspect

perfect 18, 22–24

progressive 18, 20, 22, 28

auxiliary (*see verb*)

be (*see verb*)

capitalisation 1

clause 24–27, 42, 43, 45, 49

cleft 49

collectivising 3, 4

comparatives (*see adjective*)

conditionals 17, 21, 24, 25, 44

contractions 48, 50

conversion 16

coordinators 1, 9, 38

countable noun (*see noun*)

determiner 2, 7, 8, 11

dummy (*see subject*)

ellipsis 17, 42, 43, 45, 46, 50

future (time) 21, 22, 24, 29, 31

genitive (*see possession*)

gerund 28, 33, 42

imperative (*see mood*)

infinitive (*see verb*)

modal (*see verb*)

mood 25, 32, 41, 43, 44

negatives 8, 24, 29, 30, 32, 38, 39, 40,
44–47, 50

noun

abstract 2, 6

collective 4

compound 5, 6, 13, 34, 35

countable 2, 8, 12, 13, 15

proper 1, 6, 14, 35

plural 2, 3, 5, 8, 12, 15, 48

uncountable 2, 8, 12, 13, 15

participle (*see verb*)

partitive phrase 2, 6

passives 17, 22, 26, 27, 43

perfect (*see aspect*)

possession 5–7, 11, 16

prefixes 1, 39

prepositions 1, 28, 33, 37, 43

progressive (*see aspect*)

pronoun 10, 11, 23, 25, 26, 31, 41, 43, 49

and gender 11

indefinite 10, 11, 41, 43

possessive 11

pronunciation 5, 8, 14, 16, 19, 45, 46

proper noun (*see noun*)

punctuation 5, 23, 34, 35, 40, 42, 43

quantifiers 7, 8

quantities 3, 9

questions 25, 29–31, 33, 42, 44–48, 50

declarative 46

embedded 47

exclamatory 47

rhetorical 47

tag 29, 45, 46, 48, 50

reported speech 23, 44, 47

subject (dummy) 10, 32, 41, 48, 49

subject-verb agreement 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, 25,
41, 44, 48, 49

subjunctive (*see mood*)

tense 18–25, 27, 29, 42, 48

past 18–25

present 18–24

verb

auxiliary 22, 29, 32, 38, 39, 42, 45, 46, 50

be 18, 25–27, 32, 39, 40, 48

catenative 28, 48

copular (linking) 17, 28, 34, 48

infinitive 17, 18, 28, 29, 40–43

(in)transitive 17, 18, 23, 27

irregular 18–20

modal 21, 24, 29–32, 39, 45, 46, 50

participles 18, 19, 22, 26–28, 34, 36, 42,
43